

B METRO

The Dallas Morning News

PLUS

EXPANDED LOCAL NEWS

COMPLETE COVERAGE OF THE METRO AREA, PLUS MORE FROM:

Dallas neighborhoods, Park Cities and Richardson

INDEX

Regional Roundup	2
Classifieds	13
Obituaries	10-12
Weather	14

dallasnews.com

Friday, June 22, 2007

Volunteers help bring some stability to the volatile lives of foster children

Ever felt the cold fury of frustration over one more in a never-ending series of cruel, sickening child-abuse cases?

Ever throw down the newspaper or snap off the TV in disgust over another miserable story about the overloaded-to-the-breaking-point child-welfare system? Or do you wonder what will happen to these sad, helpless kids who have known so much misery so early in life?

I met 45 people, all dressed up and waiting nervously in a courthouse hallway Thursday, who, like most of us, have experienced



JACQUELYNNE FLOYD

jfloyd@dallasnews.com

Digital EXTRA

Link: Learn more about CASA and the need for volunteers.

dallasnews.com/extra

all these sentiments.

They seemed like ordinary people — guys in suits, retirees, women you might see at the grocery store — except for this: They have figured out that just feeling bad about a problem doesn't fix it.

That's all: a roomful of Regular Joes, except that they have what may be the most valuable resource in the known universe -- the desire to be of practical use. That brought them to CASA, the easy-to-remember acronym for Court Appointed Special Advocates.

CASA uses trained volunteers

See **VOLUNTEERS** Page 2B



CHERYL DIAZ MEYER/Staff Photographer

Wendy Meeking smiled for the camera after she was sworn in Thursday as a Court Appointed Special Advocate, under the eye of Associate Judge Gracie Lewis (right) at the Henry Wade Juvenile Justice Center in Dallas.

Volunteers step up to help abused kids

Continued from Page 1B

to be hybrid caseworker-investigator-friend to children going through the sometimes-frightening and impersonal protective-care system. Appointed by juvenile court judges, they're assigned to each case for as long as that child remains in the protective care system — which can sometimes be years.

"It's a big commitment. It's not stuffing envelopes," said Mary Timmons, who oversees the CASA supervisory team that works directly with the volunteers. "Sometimes, the volunteer is the only consistent person in that child's life."

Think of it: Dependent kids, separated for their own safety from the only people they know, sent to stay with strangers. Sometimes they shuffle through a half-dozen foster homes in a year; sometimes, because there aren't enough places for them locally, they're sent to the other end of the state.

"Everything in their life is in upheaval," said Judge Cheryl Lee Shannon, who presides over the 305th District Court. "The caseworker can change, the foster homes can change, the DA on the



Volunteers picked up their ID cards after being sworn in Thursday. Each advocate is assigned to a case for as long as that child stays in the foster system.

case can change, the judge can change. The CASA volunteer is the only one who's going to be with them from the beginning to the end."

Judge Shannon said she relies on CASA volunteers to provide candid recommendations based on their own observations: Is the child being properly cared for in his foster home? When her parents visit, does she seem happy to see them? Are they going to school?

It's a level of oversight that CPS caseworkers are run too ragged to provide. And unlike caseworkers,

will have to go without.

Ms. Timmons said she thinks more people would volunteer if they even knew CASA existed, "but they just don't know we're here."

In fact, it has been around for a while. The volunteer-advocate idea was hatched by a Seattle judge in 1976, and the Dallas organization was formed three years later.

It's obviously rewarding, but I very much doubt that it's always easy. Rookie CASA volunteer Jocelyn Dabeau has worked crisis hotlines, for instance, so she knows she has a steady head and a solid commitment.

"What I'm nervous about," she said, "is how heartbreaking it's going to be."

However heartbreaking it is, though, it's going to be less so because of her involvement.

And that's the point. What gets these people in the door isn't horror and revulsion at the cruelties some children endure; we all share that. They show up to provide practical help to society's most vulnerable members.

Interested?

Experience isn't necessary, Ms. Timmons said, beyond the chief requirement: "They come to us with the heart for the job."